Title: Putting the lid on Pandora's cookie jar.
             (cookies cannot retrieve personal data without
             authorization)(Looking Forward)(PC Week Netweek)
             (Internet/Web/Online Service Information)

Author: Van Name, Mark L.
             Catchings, Bill

Abstract: The amount of data stored online about individual users is
             growing, and users should beware that data they share with one
             recipient may well appear at other sites. However, there are
             some limits on how personal information may be stored and
             retrieved. Cookies allow a specific Web site to store personal
             information on a specific user. The cookie can then use this
             information the next time the user visits the site to create
             lists of new sites that the user might find interesting.
             However, the cookies can only be created if users specifically
             give them the personal data, which is stored at only the one
             Web site and is not accessible by other Web servers.
             Similarly, E-mail addresses are protected unless users give
             them out. Web browsers cannot collect the addresses from a
             site unless users have registered with the site and given an
             E-mail address.

Full Text:

In two recent columns, we used the increased use of cookies by Web sites
as the starting point for discussions of some online privacy issues.
Several readers sent E-mail taking us to task for some of the statements
in those columns, and those folks raised some good points; we should have
been more clear in a few areas.

Though we have not changed our conclusions, we do need to thank these
readers and set the record straight.

Nate Cobb, a Webmaster at Join Together Online, wrote to summarize a key
limitation of cookies. "There is absolutely no way for a server to set a
cookie containing a user's personal information without first requesting
that information from the user. That information (E-mail address, gender,
age and so forth) can either be stored locally on the server or remotely
in a cookie; its location is a moot point. The cookie data is not
accessible to any other Web site."

Nate is correct: Cookies have no way of getting user information on the
sly. Cookies just let a site store information it might find useful the
next time you visit. For example, a site might store the URLs of pages
you've seen. The next time you visit, the site can use that data to show
you new pages. Cookie data contains a tag with the name of the storing
site, so no other site can get that data.

Sites can learn a limited amount about your computing
environment--primarily what operating system and browser you're
running--by asking your browser.

Where the URLs are

One of the most important pieces of data about your computing setup is your E-mail ID. We said browsers could supply that ID to any site that requested it.

Danny Goodman, the author of "Danny Goodman's JavaScript Handbook," wrote to correct that statement. "Your comments about collating E-mail addresses with cookie data will lead readers to think that cookies or servers somehow steal E-mail addresses. Unless you register with a site and knowingly supply an E-mail address for yourself, there is no surreptitious E-mail address reading possible, as far as I have seen. While early versions of Navigator 2.0 (2.0 and 2.01) allowed JavaScript to quietly submit a form to a mailTo: URL, this has since been shut down (beginning with 2.02), and only an explicit Submit button may initiate such a transaction."

Danny's right to note that the latest versions of Netscape's Navigator fix this problem (as if you needed more incentive to download more software). We do not know if any other browsers have the same or similar problems, but regardless, we do not expect such problems to last long in any browser. As Nate said, "Bluntly speaking, security holes are not realistically a method anyone can or will use to collect user information." Vendors tend to close holes quickly, so they tend not to be useful for long.

Despite a few errors and out-of-date information, we stand by our conclusions. The amount of online data about each of us is growing, and we should all decide now just how much data we want to share and act accordingly. We should also all be aware that information we give in one online place may well crop up in others.

There, we feel cleansed. Please do send us mail when you think we're wrong. If we are, we'll say so.

You can reach Mark Van Name and Bill Catchings via the Internet at mark--van--name@zd.com and bill--catchings@zd.com.

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